

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A system for distributing advertisements to a multiplicity of client devices each of which is configured for communications via a communications network, the system comprising:

an advertisement distribution facility that communicates with each of the client devices over the communications network, via a respective advertisement download communication link;

wherein each of the client devices downloads advertisements from the advertisement distribution facility via the respective advertisement download communication link; and

wherein each of the client devices communicates with a data communications service provider over the communications network via a respective data communications link that is separate from the respective advertisement download communication link.

2. The system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the communications network comprises the Internet.

3. The system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein each of the client devices is equipped with software that effects communications with both the advertisement distribution facility and the data communications service provider.

4. The system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the software is subsidized by revenues attributable to the downloaded advertisements.

5. The system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the data communications service provider comprises an e-mail service provider.

6. The system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the data communications service provider comprises an Internet service provider.

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7. The system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the software is e-mail software.

8. The system as set forth in Claim 7, wherein the e-mail software is subsidized by
2 revenues attributable to the downloaded advertisements.

9. The system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the data communications service
2 provider comprises an e-mail service provider.

10. The system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the data communications service
2 provider comprises an Internet service provider.

11. The system as set forth in Claim 7, wherein the data communications service
2 provider comprises an e-mail service provider.

12. The system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the advertisement distribution facility
2 is operated by a producer of the software.

13. The system as set forth in Claim 3, wherein the advertisement distribution facility
2 is operated by a vendor of the software.

14. The system as set forth in Claim 12, wherein the software is e-mail software.

15. The system as set forth in Claim 13, wherein the software is e-mail software.

16. The system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein:
2 the advertisement distribution facility transmits ad display parameters to each of the
client devices; and
4 each of the client devices displays at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements in accordance with the ad display parameters.

17. The system as set forth in Claim 16, wherein the ad display parameters specify,

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- 2 for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, how many times that advertisement is to be displayed for a given time period,
4 and how long that advertisement is to be displayed each time that it is displayed.

18. The system as set forth in Claim 16, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, how many times that advertisement is to be displayed for a given time period.

19. The system as set forth in Claim 16, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, how long that advertisement is to be displayed each time that it is displayed.

20. The system as set forth in Claim 16, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, a start date/time before which the associated advertisement should not be
4 displayed, and the end date/time after which the associated advertisement should not be
displayed.

21. The system as set forth in Claim 17, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of the at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, a start date/time before which the associated advertisement should not be
4 displayed, and the end date/time after which the associated advertisement should not be
displayed.

22. The system as set forth in Claim 16, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, the total/cumulative amount of time that advertisement is to be displayed.

23. The system as set forth in Claim 17, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of the at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, the total/cumulative amount of time that advertisement is to be displayed.

24. The system as set forth in Claim 21, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of the at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, the total/cumulative amount of time that advertisement is to be displayed.

25. The system as set forth in Claim 16, wherein the ad display parameters include
2 any one or more of the following parameters for each advertisement to be displayed:

a maximum face time that the associated advertisement is to be displayed each time
4 that it is displayed; and

a maximum cumulative face time that the associated advertisement is to be displayed;

6 wherein the face time comprises a time period during which a prescribed minimum
level of user activity occurs.

26. The system as set forth in Claim 25, wherein the user activity comprises any user
2 action that is indicative of user interaction with the client device on which the advertisements
are to be displayed.

27. The system as set forth in Claim 26, wherein the user activity comprises any user
2 action that is indicative of the user viewing a display screen associated with the client device
on which the advertisements are to be displayed.

28. The system as set forth in Claim 26, wherein the user activity comprises any of
2 the following user actions:

movement of a pointer device associated with the client device on which the
4 advertisements are to be displayed; and

use of an input device associated with the client device on which the advertisements
6 are to be displayed.

29. The system as set forth in 26, wherein the user activity comprises any of the
2 following user actions:

movement of a mouse associated with the client device on which the advertisements

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are to be displayed;

clicking of a mouse button associated with the mouse; and

movement of one or more keys of a keyboard associated with the client device on which the advertisements are to be displayed.

30. The system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the advertisement distribution facility includes:

at least one ad server, each of which stores at least one of the advertisements to be downloaded;

at least one playlist server that generates at least one playlist; and

each playlist identifies a plurality of advertisements to be downloaded by at least one of the client devices.

31. The system as set forth in Claim 30, wherein each playlist contains a list of the advertisements to be downloaded by at least one of the client devices, and a source address identifying a site from which each listed advertisement can be fetched.

32. The system as set forth in Claim 30, wherein each playlist contains a list of the advertisements to be downloaded by at least one of the client devices, and the address of the ad server where each listed advertisement is stored.

33. The system as set forth in Claim 30, wherein the advertisement distribution facility is controlled by a vendor of the software.

34. The system as set forth in Claim 30, wherein the at least one ad server comprises a plurality of ad servers that each store at least one of the advertisements to be downloaded by at least one of the client devices.

35. The system as set forth in Claim 30, wherein:

the at least one playlist server is controlled by a vendor of the software; and

the at least one ad server comprises a plurality of ad servers that each store one or

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- 4 more advertisements to be distributed to clients of the vendor of the software; and
at least one of the plurality of ad servers is controlled by the vendor of the software.

36. The system as set forth in Claim 30, wherein:
2 the at least one playlist server is controlled by a vendor of the software; and
the at least one ad server comprises a plurality of ad servers that each store one or
4 more advertisements to be distributed to clients of the vendor of the software; and
at least one of the plurality of ad servers is controlled by an entity other than the
6 vendor of the software that has granted the vendor of the software and its clients access to its
ad server(s).

37. The system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the advertisement distribution facility
2 includes:
at least one ad server which stores the advertisements to be downloaded by the client
4 devices, each advertisement being stored in a storage location designated by a source address;
at least one playlist server that generates at least one playlist, and transmits one or
6 more of the generated playlists to each client device; and
each playlist identifies a plurality of advertisements to be downloaded by at least one
8 of the client devices.

38. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the at least one ad server comprises
2 a plurality of ad servers that each store at least one of the advertisements to be downloaded
by at least one of the client devices.

39. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein:
2 the at least one playlist server is controlled by a vendor of the software; and
the at least one ad server comprises a plurality of ad servers that each store one or
4 more advertisements to be distributed to clients of the vendor of the software; and
at least one of the plurality of ad servers is controlled by the vendor of the software.

40. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein:

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- 2 the at least one playlist server is controlled by a vendor of the software; and
the at least one ad server comprises a plurality of ad servers that each store one or
4 more advertisements to be distributed to clients of the vendor of the software; and
at least one of the plurality of ad servers is controlled by an entity other than the
6 vendor of the software that has granted the vendor of the software and its clients access to its
ad server(s).

41. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein each playlist contains a list of ad
2 identifiers that identify respective ones of the advertisements to be downloaded, and a list of
corresponding source addresses that identify the corresponding storage location from which
4 each respective advertisement can be fetched.

42. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the at least one playlist server
2 includes a playlist processing function that receives an identification of a current playlist(s)
from each of the client devices, and in response thereto, transmits to each respective one of
4 the client devices an indication that its current playlist(s) is valid and does not need to be
augmented, or a new playlist(s).

43. The system as set forth in Claim 41, wherein the at least one playlist server
2 includes a playlist processing function that receives an identification of a current playlist(s)
from each of the client devices, and in response thereto, transmits to each respective one of
4 the client devices an indication that its current playlist(s) is valid and does not need to be
augmented, or a new playlist(s).

44. The system as set forth in Claim 43, wherein each of the client devices compares
2 the ad identifiers listed in its current playlist(s) with the ad identifiers listed in its new
playlist(s), generates a list of source addresses for the advertisements corresponding to the ad
4 identifiers in its new playlist(s) that are different from the ad identifiers contained in its
current playlist(s), and then fetches the advertisements corresponding to the generated list of
6 source addresses from the appropriate storage locations, over one or more advertisement
download sessions.

45. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the at least one playlist server
2 includes a playlist processing function that, at prescribed playlist check intervals, receives an
identification of a current playlist(s) from each of the client devices, and in response thereto,
4 transmits to each respective one of the client devices an indication that its current playlist(s)
is valid and does not need to be augmented, or a new playlist.

46. The system as set forth in Claim 41, wherein the at least one playlist server
2 includes a playlist processing function that, at prescribed playlist check intervals, receives an
identification of a current playlist(s) from each of the client devices, and in response thereto,
4 transmits to each respective one of the client devices an indication that its current playlist(s)
is valid and does not need to be augmented, or a new playlist.

47. The system as set forth in Claim 46, wherein each of the client devices compares
2 the ad identifiers listed in its current playlist(s) with the ad identifiers listed in its new
playlist(s), generates a list of source addresses for the advertisements corresponding to the ad
4 identifiers in its new playlist(s) that are different from the ad identifiers contained in its
current playlist(s), and then fetches the advertisements corresponding to the generated list of
6 source addresses from the appropriate storage locations, over one or more advertisement
download sessions.

48. The system as set forth in Claim 44, wherein each advertisement download
2 session is limited to a prescribed maximum time duration.

49. The system as set forth in Claim 47, wherein each advertisement download
2 session is limited to a prescribed maximum time duration.

50. The system as set forth in Claim 1, wherein the advertisements comprise
2 advertisement files each of which includes an image.

51. The system as set forth in Claim 50, wherein each image comprises one of a GIF

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2 image, a PNG image, and a JPEG image.

52. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein:

2 each playlist contains ad display parameters; and

each of the client devices displays at least selected ones of the downloaded
4 advertisements in accordance with the ad display parameters.

53. The system as set forth in Claim 52, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, how many times that advertisement is to be displayed for a given time period,
4 and how long that advertisement is to be displayed each time that it is displayed.

54. The system as set forth in Claim 52, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, how many times that advertisement is to be displayed for a given time period.

55. The system as set forth in Claim 52, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, how long that advertisement is to be displayed each time that it is displayed.

56. The system as set forth in Claim 52, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, a start date/time before which the associated advertisement should not be
4 displayed, and the end date/time after which the associated advertisement should not be
displayed.

57. The system as set forth in Claim 53, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of the at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded
advertisements, a start date/time before which the associated advertisement should not be
4 displayed, and the end date/time after which the associated advertisement should not be
displayed.

58. The system as set forth in Claim 52, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded advertisements, the total/cumulative amount of time that advertisement is to be displayed.

59. The system as set forth in Claim 53, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of the at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded advertisements, the total/cumulative amount of time that advertisement is to be displayed.

60. The system as set forth in Claim 57, wherein the ad display parameters specify,
2 for each of the at least prescribed ones of the at least selected ones of the downloaded advertisements, the total/cumulative amount of time that advertisement is to be displayed.

61. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the at least one playlist server
2 receives from each of the client devices a respective cookie containing information relating to user/client device behavior and/or user demographics specific to that particular client device.

62. The system as set forth in Claim 61, wherein the at least one playlist server
2 selects the one or more playlists to be transmitted to each client device based at least partially on the respective cookie received from that client device.

63. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the at least one playlist server
2 selects the one or more playlists to be transmitted to each client device based at least partially on monitored behavior of that client device.

64. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the at least one playlist server
2 selects the one or more playlists to be transmitted to each client device based at least partially on user demographics.

65. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the one or more playlists transmitted
2 to each client device is customized to that client device.

66. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the one or more playlists transmitted to each client device is tailored to that client device.

67. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the at least one playlist server selects the one or more playlists to be transmitted to each client device based at least partially on client information uploaded to the advertisement distribution facility by each client device.

68. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the at least one playlist server selects the one or more playlists to be transmitted to each client device based at least partially on client information uploaded to the advertisement distribution facility by each client device at prescribed update intervals.

69. The system as set forth in Claim 45, wherein the at least one playlist server selects the one or more playlists to be transmitted to each client device based at least partially on client information uploaded to the advertisement distribution facility by each client device at prescribed update intervals.

70. The system as set forth in Claim 46, wherein the at least one playlist server selects the one or more playlists to be transmitted to each client device based at least partially on client information uploaded to the advertisement distribution facility by each client device at prescribed update intervals.

71. The system as set forth in Claim 69, wherein the prescribed update intervals comprise the prescribed playlist check intervals.

72. The system as set forth in Claim 70, wherein the prescribed update intervals comprise the prescribed playlist check intervals.

73. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the at least one playlist server transmits one or more of the generated playlists to each client device in response to a playlist

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request that it receives from that client device.

74. The system as set forth in Claim 45, wherein the at least one playlist server transmits one or more of the generated playlists to each client device in response to a playlist request that it receives from that client device.

75. The system as set forth in Claim 46, wherein the at least one playlist server transmits one or more of the generated playlists to each client device in response to a playlist request that it receives from that client device.

76. The system as set forth in Claim 74, wherein each client device generates a respective playlist request at the prescribed playlist check intervals.

77. The system as set forth in Claim 75, wherein each client device generates a respective playlist request at the prescribed playlist check intervals.

78. The system as set forth in Claim 37, wherein the at least one playlist server transmits one or more of the generated playlists to each client device in response to a playlist request that it receives from that client device, at prescribed playlist check intervals.